



On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities*, edited by Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour. *On Common Ground* presents the insights and expertise of some of the leading educational thinkers and authors in North America today. Their collective work provides both a sound conceptual framework and specific, practical strategies for improving student achievement by developing the capacity of educators to create professional learning communities within their schools and districts.

This study guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It is designed to help you benefit from and apply the ideas presented in *On Common Ground*. It can be used by individuals, small

groups, or an entire faculty to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, assess conditions in a particular school, and suggest steps that might be taken to promote PLC concepts in a school or district. You might also compare and contrast the authors' positions by examining their opinions on the following topics:

- The fundamental purpose of schooling
- Clarity regarding what students must learn
- Frequent, timely monitoring of student learning
- Common assessments developed by teacher teams
- A system of interventions that provide students with extra time and support for learning
- The need for a collaborative culture
- The importance of acting on what we know to be best practice
- The significance of self-efficacy and the need for educators to acknowledge their impact on student learning
- The importance of addressing school culture
- The most effective approaches to professional development
- Effective leadership in a PLC

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope that this guide proves to be a useful tool in your efforts to implement PLC concepts in your school or district.

Introduction

On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities

By Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour

In the foreword, Mike Schmoker contends that successful implementation of PLC concepts in schools throughout North America “could redefine public education and education professions and enable us to reach unprecedented levels of quality, equity, and achievement.” His position is endorsed by more than 20 educational leaders whose names appear at the end of the foreword. In chapter 1 (pages 8 and 9), the authors identify professional organizations that have specifically called for schools to be organized as PLCs or that have adopted improvement models based on key PLC concepts. The Introduction specifies some of these concepts, stating students would be better served if educators:

- Embrace learning rather than teaching as the primary mission of their school
- Work collaboratively to help all students learn
- Use frequent, timely formative assessments to identify students who need additional time and support, to inform professional practice, and to drive continuous improvement
- Acknowledge their ability to impact student achievement and accept responsibility for creating such schools

1. Can you identify any leading educational researcher or organization that has explicitly expressed opposition to professional learning communities or to the concepts listed above?

2. If the benefits of PLC concepts seem almost universally accepted, why aren't PLCs the norm in schools across North America?

Chapter 1

Recurring Themes of Professional Learning Communities and the Assumptions They Challenge

By Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour

1. What are the three challenges the authors believe will confront those who hope to make PLCs the norm in schools and districts throughout North America?
2. How do the authors define “school culture”?
3. The authors report that “the idea that all students could or should learn at high levels was inconceivable to earlier generations, and they designed their institutions [that is, their schools] to reflect their basic assumption that intelligence was something you were born with, not something you acquired.” If someone were to allege that this assumption continues to drive the work of your school, what evidence could you present to refute that allegation?
4. The authors claim that ensuring all students learn at high levels is the guiding and unifying principle that drives the work of PLCs. On pages 15 and 16 they identify four critical questions and cite five specific topics that teachers address in a PLC that flow directly from that principle. What are the questions and topics?

5. In attempting to explain why teachers continue to work in isolation when the research so clearly demonstrates the benefits of a collaborative culture, the authors cite five possible explanations (pages 17 and 18). Which seems most plausible to you? Do you have another explanation? What steps should a school take in order to overcome this tradition of teacher isolation?
6. In describing high-quality common assessments developed by members of a collaborative team, the authors contend that such assessments would be *timely, standards based, formative*, with results that are *easily accessible to and openly shared among* the members of a team. What do these terms mean to you? Evaluate the assessments in your school according to these criteria.
7. Review the quote from Roland Barth that concludes the chapter (page 25). What is your reaction to his observation?

Chapter 2

What Is a Professional Learning Community?

By Richard DuFour

1. Michael Fullan observes, “There is a growing problem in large-scale reform; namely, the *terms* travel well, but the underlying *conceptualizing and thinking* do not.” This chapter was written to acknowledge and address that specific problem. What does Fullan mean?

2. According to the author, three “big ideas” drive the work of professional learning communities. What are those ideas?
3. Review the scenario on pages 33 and 34. Is it a fair representation of what typically happens in school when students do not learn?
4. Use the description of a PLC’s response to a student who is not learning (pages 34 and 35) to assess your school’s response to that situation.
5. Examine the collaborative team process described on pages 37 and 38. As you consider each part of the process, point by point, compare it to the collaboration that is occurring in your school.
6. The author contends that the right goals can help promote a results orientation among a staff. What are the goals of your school? What are the goals of your team?
 - Are your goals **strategic** (that is, team goals are linked to and intended to help achieve school goals, and school goals are linked to and intended to help achieve district goals)?
 - Are your goals **measurable** (that is, presented with baseline data that allow the team to demonstrate improvement)?
 - Are your goals **attainable**? Does the staff believe they can achieve the goal by working together?
 - Are your goals **results-oriented** (that is, do they focus on results for students rather than projects or activities for teachers)?

- Are your goals **timebound**? Is there a specified period of time by which the goal is to be attained?

Chapter 3

Putting It All Together: Standards, Assessment, and Accountability in Successful Professional Learning Communities

By Douglas Reeves

1. How does Reeves define the term “power standards” and what are the criteria he suggests should be used to identify power standards?
2. How does Reeves distinguish between “curriculum by default” and “curriculum by design”? Which is most evident in your school?
3. Even though Reeves is a leading proponent for consistent standards of learning to promote equity, he contends that “standards without assessment are fantasies.” He asserts that frequent common classroom assessments for learning are “the second component necessary for excellence.” What are key criteria he suggests for effective assessment for learning? Use each criterion to evaluate the assessment practices of your school.
4. What does Reeves mean when he writes, “While the nation may be . . . over-tested, our students are actually under-assessed?”

5. Reeves claims that there are only two ways to assess a student's performance:

- Whether or not a student achieves an intended standard
- How the student's performance compares to others

Can you offer a third alternative? Of the two alternatives presented by Reeves, which would be more effective in promoting equity and which would be more effective in encouraging students to keep working toward success?

6. Consider the tier accountability system recommended by Reeves on pages 60 and 61. Have you addressed each of the three tiers in your school?

Chapter 4

Assessment FOR Learning: Building a Culture of Confident Learners

By Rick Stiggins

1. Stiggins cites research that concludes that effective classroom assessment can cause increased student learning if certain conditions are met. What are those conditions?
2. How would you summarize Stiggins' characterization of the *assessment legacy* that continues to impact practice in schools?
3. Describe the effect of this legacy on the performance of both high-performing and low-performing students.

4. How does Stiggins distinguish between Assessment *OF* Learning and Assessment *FOR* Learning?
5. Stiggins is very explicit in describing the role of the teacher in Assessment *FOR Learning*. What is that role? Are teachers fulfilling that role in your school?
6. What strategies does Stiggins offer for involving students in Assessment *FOR Learning*? To what extent are these strategies being used in your school?

Chapter 5
Masters of Motivation
By Jonathon Saphier

1. Saphier emphasizes that PLCs are characterized not only by collaborative structures but also by key beliefs that are manifested both in individual behavior and school policy. What is the key belief this chapter addresses?
2. What does Saphier mean when he calls upon schools to do “attribution retraining” for students with a history of low academic performance?
3. Saphier presents seven specific interactive teaching behaviors that promote a belief in effort-based ability (beginning on page 90). Observe three different classrooms in your school and identify the extent to which these strategies are being used.

4. Consider the five points Saphier lists under Classroom Structures and Procedures (page 93) that can contribute to student belief in effort-based ability. Does your school address these issues as matters of policy, or does each teacher establish his or her own classroom policy in these areas? If the latter, is there consistency among the policies?
5. Saphier contends that teachers can explicitly and directly teach students how to exert effective effort, and he provides strategies for doing so. Do you agree? Do you address this objective in your curriculum and instructional practices?
6. Consider Saphier's ideas regarding assignment of teachers, course schedules, grouping, and provision of extra help to at-risk students. What is your reaction to his proposals?
7. In part two of his chapter (beginning on page 104), Saphier offers very specific strategies for promoting belief in effort-based ability throughout a staff. Consider each of his points under the five major headings. How many of these steps are taking place in your school?

Chapter 6

Turning Book Burners Into Lifelong Learners

By Roland S. Barth

1. Barth observes that “beneath the culture of all too many schools, school systems, and even universities lurks a very chilling message to students: ‘Learn or we will punish you.’” What is your reaction to Barth’s observation?
2. What does Barth identify as the “most basic graduation requirement,” and what is his rationale to support that assertion?
3. Consider Barth’s definition of lifelong learning. Do you disagree with any of the indicators he identifies? Is your school taking steps to monitor these indicators?
4. What strategies does Barth offer for principals who hope to create a school culture that promotes a commitment to lifelong learning?
5. What is the core strategy Barth suggests for monitoring whether or not students are graduating as “insatiable, lifelong learners?”
6. Barth proposes “one thing to reform education in North America to help build a community of lifelong learners.” What is that one thing? Is your school making any attempt to promote what he suggests?

7. Barth suggests that schools replace their underlying message to students—“learn or we will punish you”—with a more positive message. What message does he suggest?

Chapter 7

No Turning Back: The Ironclad Case for Professional Learning Communities

By Mike Schmoker

1. Schmoker uses both classic research (Lortie, 1975) and more contemporary research (Elmore, 2000) to describe the work world of teachers. Do you feel their descriptions are valid today?
2. Schmoker identifies both the “enemy of improvement” and “improvement’s best friend” in terms of school reform. What are they?
3. Schmoker stresses that it is not just collaboration that improves schools, but the right kind of collaboration. What are the characteristics of this powerful collaboration?
4. Schmoker notes that research from the private sector supports the fundamental practices of PLCs. What does Tom Peters propose as “the basic organizational building block” of excellent organizations?

5. What does Schmoker mean when he refers to “collective autonomy” as an alternative to rigid supervision?
6. Schmoker reports that teachers acknowledge they routinely do not apply what they know to be effective practices in their classrooms. What is your explanation for this admitted failure to apply best practices?
7. Schmoker quotes Peter Block in saying, “We have all the skills, the tools, the training we need” to improve. In a later chapter Larry Lezotte makes the same point when he relates that Ron Edmonds would remind faculties that “they already knew more than they needed to know to improve the school.” Do you agree that your staff has all the necessary expertise to improve current results if members become more effective in working together?

Chapter 8

Leading for Transformation in Teaching, Learning, and Relationships

By Dennis Sparks

1. Sparks contends that “profound professional learning produces teachers and administrators who say what they have not said, believe what they have not believed, understand what they have not understood, and do what they have not done.” Can you identify a time in your career that you have experienced this “profound professional learning?” If so, describe the circumstances.

2. Can you identify an example of this profound professional learning that has occurred for the faculty of your school?
3. In describing the “final two percent” of professional development, Sparks contends it will move beyond structural changes and re-allocation of resources. How does he describe the impact of the final two percent?
4. Sparks cites three barriers to PLCs. What are those barriers? To what extent are they evident in your school?
5. What is your understanding of the “Teachable Point of View?” Is there evidence of a Teachable Point of View being presented in your school?
6. After examining Sparks' suggestions about effective use of dialogue, select a topic related to PLCs and practice engaging in dialogue on that topic with a colleague. At the conclusion of your dialogue, review his suggestions and assess how well you adhered to those suggestions.

Chapter 9

More Effective Schools: Professional Learning Communities in Action

By Lawrence W. Lezotte

1. What was the impetus for the Effective Schools research?

2. Lezotte explains that the findings of the Effective Schools research not only challenged the conclusion that “schools do not make a difference,” but also raised two new questions. What were those questions?
3. Lezotte points out that the findings regarding factors that contribute to Effective Schools have stood the test of time for 40 years. What are these factors, or Correlates of Effective Schools?
4. Lezotte explains that one of the challenges confronting the Effective Schools researchers was explaining how those schools became effective. In responding to that challenge the researchers used three different lenses to examine school change. What were those lenses?
5. Lezotte identifies “the first and most compelling success factor” in the change process and the “cornerstone of sustainable school change.” What is his conclusion? What are the implications of that conclusion?
6. What does Lezotte recommend regarding the composition of the core leadership group? What is the fundamental purpose of the group?
7. Examine each of the core beliefs of the Effective School Process. What is your reaction to each of these beliefs?
8. What is Lezotte’s assessment of PLC concepts?

Chapter 10

Implementing PLCs in the Chicago Public Schools

By Barbara Eason-Watkins

1. The Chicago Public School (CPS) system's attempt to promote district-wide reform was made even more challenging by the reform legislation of 1988. What was that legislation and why would it compound the challenge of district-wide reform?
2. CPS attempted to meet this challenge by developing a three-step plan. What were the steps?
3. What were some of the specific steps taken by CPS to provide district-level support for the change process to each individual school?
4. Eason-Watkins makes the point that it is not only school sites that are being called upon to function as learning communities. She identifies several different structural arrangements that are working as learning communities in CPS. What are those structures?
5. What are the questions that guide the work of teams conducting school walk-throughs at CPS?
6. How does the approach to professional development of the CPS STARS program differ from more traditional approaches to professional development?

Chapter 11

Professional Learning Communities Writ Large

By Michael Fullan

1. Fullan contends that “we have an increasingly clear picture of the nature and importance of professional learning communities in schools.” He goes on to describe some of the widely recognized characteristics of PLCs. What are some of those characteristics?
2. Fullan contends that without a “tri-level solution” PLCs will never become the norm, but will instead represent a small percentage of “temporary havens of excellence.” What is the tri-level solution?
3. How does Fullan define “capacity-building?” What are the “powerful collective phenomena” that are synergized by capacity-building?
4. Fullan and his associates focused on the culture of school districts and addressed the question, “How do entire districts become professional learning communities?” What were their findings?
5. Fullan cites four implications to his proposed tri-level solution. What are those implications? Can you explain each in your own words?
6. What advice does Fullan offer regarding how to change and develop the social environment to foster sustainability?

7. What is the role of individual teachers and principals in the tri-level strategy according to Fullan? Does he advise that they should wait to implement PLC concepts in their schools until their districts and states are supportive of PLCs?

Chapter 12

Closing the Knowing-Doing Gap

By Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour

1. What is the “knowing-doing gap”? Explain it in your own words. Can you cite examples of a knowing-doing gap in your own school or district?
2. What strategy do the authors suggest for overcoming the tendency to substitute a decision for action?
3. What strategy do the authors suggest for overcoming the tendency to substitute mission for action?
4. What is your reaction to the research finding that “planning is essentially unrelated to organizational performance”?
5. What strategies do the authors suggest for overcoming the problem of complexity as a barrier to action?
6. What strategies do the authors suggest for overcoming the problem of mindless precedent as a barrier to action?

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7. What is your reaction to Pfeffer and Sutton's observations about a "sharing culture" on page 236? Do you have a sharing culture in your school? What steps could you take to promote such a culture?
8. What advice do the authors provide for overcoming the tendency to focus on attitudes as a barrier to change?"
9. What do Pfeffer and Sutton propose is the best solution to the knowing-doing gap?
10. What steps can you take immediately to close the knowing-doing gap in your school?